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Writing Narrative – Draft 1

When you’re too young to understand letters sent home from school without mom and dad reading them to you, if at all, such missives fail to illicit the responses older students might offer – from trepidation to excitement according to the nature of the notice and prior actions of the receiving party. An official yellow piece of paper stuffed in your backpack at the end of the school day is a matter for “grown-ups,” not first-graders.

This letter turned out to be different, however. Because after the yellow letter came crumpled out of my backpack, every Saturday morning for about two months that winter I spent at my school, in my classroom. We sat at the familiar round tables with small chairs of varying colors. Most of the kids sitting around the table with me were my age, yet unfamiliar; however, a few of my classmates at Hershey Elementary were sitting with me. They must’ve gotten the yellow papers, too. One boy I played on the playground with was there, Josh. Josh with brown hair and blue eyes.

Our teacher was new to me, and had brown hair too, wavy, down to her waist. She pushed it behind her shoulder as she passed out blank sheets of paper to all of us kids. With a sunny and encouraging voice she asked us to picture in our heads what an “elegant lady” or a “sophisticated gentleman” would look like: What would this lady wear? Where would such a gentleman go? What does a lady or gentleman do? What do these people like?

One boy in our group asked, “What’s sophisticated,” after the teacher tried to explain it.

We had two assignments that day. First, with pencils and regardless of limited spelling and grammar know-how we were to put into words what our minds pictured when we thought about our ideal, elegant, sophisticated ladies and gentleman. We also were asked to use crayons and markers to create a picture of how these fine gentleman and ladies would step out into the world being so elegant and sophisticated.

My lady was quite independent and spirited. She wore a fabulous hat – black, velvety with applique flowers. She only wore high heels and fancy dresses, of course. (may add a few details from book – I’ll be looking at it this weekend when I go home! )

When everyone finished drawing and writing it was time to go home. I don’t think we really knew what we were doing besides writing and drawing; it was like school in that we had to sit and listen and do school-y things, but it was different. It was fun telling stories. And after all, we had gotten the yellow paper saying we were invited to be here. That must’ve meant something!

During the rest of our time spent around those tables writing and drawing, we got to writemake up stories about lots of things, and sometimes from our own ideas. (may add a detail here after I see the book, again)

Near to the end of our time together our teacher, with her smiley face and skinny hands, passed out more papers and asked us to recopy three or four of our favorite stories and corresponding drawings. I felt the need to do these in my most careful handwriting, with the best colors out of the crayon box because our teacher was going to take them and print them, make them into books. Then we were to come to an important event with our families at the school, on another Saturday, to read everything we had written and see everything we had drawn in published form. We would get to read the things our classmates wrote. Other people were coming too, to see what we had made.

I had a special dress. Purple with flowers and lace. My mom was sick that morning, so my dad dressed up as well. He put on his nice slacks and a nice shirt. At school, the cafeteria was filled with long tables, which were covered in our books. And people leaning over the tables. Reading. Looking. Writing.

There was Jessica’s book, with the pipe cleaner design on the front. I lightly touched the flowers and opened the cover, discovering the things she had written about her dog, about her family, about her elegant lady. I found Josh’s book. It had stories about playing outside with his friends, and his sophisticated man had a big briefcase and a funny hat. I liked these stories. Dad walked with me and looked too. Then we found my book. People had written nice things in the back about my stories, my elegant lady. They liked her hat. They thought I was creative.

Just then, a lady with big jewelry and colorful clothes came to me, and bent over to see me and told me she liked my stories, that she thought I would be a good writer some day. Dad told me she was a state representative, someone who was part of the government, like Grandpa Lietz was a mayor, only she had to take care of more people than a mayor.

I came home that night and told mom all about the books and the people and showed her what people had written to me, since we got to take our books with us. We were done going to school on Saturdays. Mom gave me hugs and told me she was proud of me, and made me sit in front of the television. She turned on the VCR and it made its fast, revving sound. On the tape she had recorded the news because the TV people had been at our special event and I was on TV, too. My book, my story, in a close-up shot. There was our teacher, with her long hair. She wore a nice dress that day, like my elegant lady.

Taking part in an Indiana Young Author’s Conference as a seven-year-old was a hugely inspiring and memorable experience, even though I didn’t fully appreciate it in 1987. My teacher saw something in me and in each of us small children worth driving to school for all those wintry weeks. Our writing teacher came because she believed in the importance of what kids have to say, that kids can and need to and want to learn to be creative and expressive. She gave us a freedom to invent and dream and imagine who we wanted to be and what we might have to say about that.

At the end of the program we were each given a blank, hard-bound book with which to write and illustrate our next story. The book was a promise of our expressions yet to be born, but the gesture of its being given was a validation that each of us had the capacity to create and to be part of the literary world. No matter that we hadn’t figured out how to properly punctuate half our sentences.

The experience has remained with me as a reminder that I, as does each human being, have a capacity to create, and tapping into that is a powerful thing! My inclusion in this conference said to me that if someone tells a small children he or she can write, that means we all have a creative expression inside of us that, when released, changes our world in some way. This is the kind of transformative encouragement I want to give others— especially my future students and regardless of a special conference invitation – as I continue to live it out in my own sphere of creativity.